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The Personality Divide: Do Personality Traits Differentially Predict Online Political Engagement?

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The personality divide: Do personality traits differentially predict online political engagement?

Silvia Russo & Erik Amnå

Youth & Society, Örebro University

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The personality divide: Do personality traits differentially predict online political engagement?

Abstract

Personality traits are considered efficient predictors of offline political participation. However, the effects of personality traits on online political engagement have been largely understudied. The main goal of this cross-sectional research ($N = 1134$, sample of young adults) was to investigate the relationships between personality traits, as measured by the Big Five Inventory, and online political engagement. As dependent variables, we took three dimensions of online political engagement: e-targeted, e-expressive, and e-news. A latent variables structural equation model showed that personality traits directly and indirectly predict modes of online political engagement via the mediation of political attitudes and the proneness to use Internet. On the whole, we found that people open to experience and extraverts take part in online political actions, whereas agreeable and conscientious tend to avoid them. The findings provide insights on the differences between traditional form (i.e. offline) and the new online modes of political engagement by showing that, to some extent, the latter appeal to different personality profiles. In sum online engagement seems to be marked by a personality divide.

Keywords: personality; political engagement; Internet; youths

In the last decade, the general concern for youths' detachment from politics has been gradually replaced by a shared optimism regarding the potential of new media, i.e. Internet, to revitalize political engagement among young people (e.g., Bakker & De Vreese, 2011; Östman, 2012; Quintelier & Vissers, 2008). It is not surprising that online political activity or "e-participation" has attracted the attention of political behaviorists (e.g., Best & Krueger, 2005; Jennings & Zeitner, 2003; Xenos & Moy, 2007). However, despite such increasing attention to online political engagement, the analysis of dispositional factors that can boost or reduce participation in online political actions has been largely dismissed.

In the offline sphere, personality traits are widely demonstrated predictors of various political behaviors (Mondak, Hibbing, Canache, Seligson, & Anderson, 2010), ranging from legal and illegal activities, turnout, and protest (Gallego & Oberski, 2012) to political communication and information seeking (Gerber, Huber, Doherty, & Dowling, 2011; Hibbing, Ritchie, & Anderson, 2011). These studies converge in showing that, just as in other life domains, personality plays a fundamental role in shaping both the extent to which and the way in which people participate in a variety of political activities.

In spite of the extensive knowledge about the relationship between offline political engagement and personality traits, only a few studies focused on the relationship between personality predispositions and online political engagement (Ha, Kim, & Jo, 2013; Jordan, Pope, Wallis, & Iyer, in press; Quintelier & Theocharis, 2013). Although these contributions are undoubtedly a valuable starting point, they have some main limitations. First, their focus was limited to just a few political actions. Second, they did not test indirect effects (but see Jordan et al., in press), while most of previous research showed that the effects of personality on political engagement are mainly mediated by political attitudes (e.g., Gallego & Oberski, 2012). Third, specific uses of the Internet were not taken into account as control or mediating variables, even though there is a bulk of research showing that personality traits are differently associated with the use of Internet for different purposes (Orchard & Fullwood, 2010).

In this study we argue that a more comprehensive definition of online political engagement is needed before drawing any conclusions about the link between personality and political use of the Internet. In addition, we suggest that the analysis of direct links between personality and online engagement should be complemented with the analysis of indirect effects. To this aim, we think about online political engagement both in terms of content of the actions, i.e. actions directed to influence, communicate, or gather information on political issues, *and* in terms of the specific environment where these actions take place, the Internet. Therefore, in order to detect whether the online political world is populated by people with specific personality profiles, we consider two sets of explanatory (mediating) variables: attitudes toward politics and proneness to use the Internet for specific purposes.

This contribution addresses the relationship between personality traits, as measured by the Big Five Inventory, and online political engagement in young adulthood. Young people are often considered the primary source of civic and political disengagement (e.g., Putnam, 2000). However, this is true in the offline realm of political participation, but not in the online sphere. In fact, youths are today more likely to be politically active in the Internet than in the offline world, and their online engagement far outstrips adults and elderly's levels of online political engagement (Di Gennaro & Dutton, 2006; Gibson, Lusoli, & Ward, 2005). We first review studies that have specifically focused on the measurement of online political engagement. We then present the five personality traits by discussing how we expect them to be related to the topic under study, i.e. politics, and the medium we focus on, i.e. the Internet. Finally, we present and discuss results related to mediated and direct effects of personality characteristics on online modes of political engagement by distinguishing between online traditional forms of political participation, political communication, and political information seeking.

Online Forms of Political Engagement

Online political engagement encompasses a variety of Internet-based political activities (Ekman & Amnå, 2012). Somewhat surprisingly, despite the widespread increase in Internet usage,

contributions dedicated to the study of the dimensionality of online political participation are still scarce. Indeed, most scholars so far have considered and studied online political engagement as a one-dimensional construct (e.g., Jugert, Eckstein, Noack, Kuhn, & Benbow, 2013; Robles, De Marco, & Antino, 2013). However, by not adopting a nuanced approach to the study of political engagement, these researchers “fail to capture the new and wider range of behaviors involved in online participation” (Gibson, Lusoli, & Ward, 2005, p. 566). Only a few studies have challenged this one-dimensional view by embracing a broader and more nuanced definition of online political engagement.

Among the few, Bakker and De Vreese (2011) made a distinction, within the area of online participation, between active and passive political actions, while Gil de Zúñiga, Puig-i Abril and Rojas (2009) distinguished between online political discussion, online political campaigning, and a more general measure of online political participation. A study by Gibson and Cantijoch (2013), however, is currently the contribution most specifically dedicated to the study of the dimensionality of online political engagement. Relying on a UK representative sample, Gibson and Cantijoch provided empirical support (through confirmatory factor analyses) for the idea that online engagement is a multi-dimensional concept that comprises four main lines of political engagement: ‘E-party’ taps activities specifically related to electoral campaigns, including actions such as registering as a supporter of a party or a candidate on the party’s website; ‘E-targeted’ encompasses traditional online political activities, such as donating to various causes, contacting government, and signing online petitions; ‘E-news’ captures a more passive form of engagement, such as paying attention to online news sources; ‘E-expressive’ refers to online activities related to the social media, such as posting comments of a political nature on a blog or the wall of a social networking site, and online discussions about politics, thereby tapping web-based political communication. For this study, following Gibson and Cantijoch (2013), we adopted a definition of online political engagement that encompasses – but is not limited to – traditional indicators of political participation. To this end, we focused on three¹ modes of online political engagement (e-targeted, e-

expressive, and e-news) with the aim of exploring whether personality traits are differentially related to diverse modes of online engagement.

Our interest in online political engagement derived from the fact that the medium through which involvement in online political activities occurs may play a substantial role in making online engagement appealing to different personality profiles. As a matter of fact, even when online political actions are strongly connected to offline political actions, they still require different levels of individual effort and can have different consequences. For instance, there is the case for keeping oneself informed about political issues. With the advent of many easily attainable online news sources with highly interactive features, being attentive to political issues assumes a more active form than it has traditionally (Krueger, 2002; Gibson & Cantijoch, 2013). In addition, the expression of one's own thoughts and political stances on the web certainly has the potential to enhance influence and to make the individual's views more immediately and publicly available than does any form of offline expression (Robertson, Vatrappu, & Medina, 2010). The political use of social media, especially in the younger cohorts, leads people to live their lives publicly (Swigger, 2013).

Personality Traits, Internet Use and Political Engagement

Personality traits are “dimensions of individual differences in tendencies to show consistent patterns of thought, feelings, and actions” (McCrae & Costa, 1990, p. 23). The Big Five approach is based on the idea that five trait dimensions provide a comprehensive model of personality structure, meaning that diverse personality characteristics (e.g., talkative, outgoing) can be classified into five domains: Openness to Experience, Conscientiousness, Extraversion, Agreeableness, and Neuroticism. Big Five is currently the most prominent approach to the study of personality, and the five factors have been identified and described in many different countries and cultural contexts (e.g., Allik & McCrae, 2004; McCrae & Costa, 1997).

Openness to Experience

Openness to Experience describes the breadth and depth of the individual's mental life (John, Naumann, & Soto, 2008). Individuals scoring high in Openness show intellectual curiosity, a wide range of cultural interests, appreciate novelty and new ideas. This trait is related to all sorts of engagement; it has been shown to influence positively political participation, interpersonal discussion on political issues, and political information seeking (Gerber et al., 2011; Hibbing et al., 2011; Mondak & Halperin, 2008; Vecchione & Caprara, 2009). There is evidence supporting the idea that Openness to Experience fosters engagement in traditional forms of political participation, mainly through the mediation of political efficacy and interest in politics (Gallego & Oberski, 2012; Mondak et al., 2010; Vecchione & Caprara, 2009). Previous studies showed that people open to new experiences engage also in online political participation (Quintelier & Theocharis, 2013; Jordan et al., in press) and online political discussions (Ha et al., 2013).

As concerns the link between Openness and Internet use, empirical findings showed that people open to new experience are prone to use the Web, especially for entertainment and product information (Tuten & Bosnjak, 2001), the use of blogs (Guadagno, Okdie, & Eno, 2008) and social media use (Correa, Hinsley, & Gil de Zúñiga, 2010; Ross et al., 2009). This is not surprising given that people high in Openness to Experience are characterized by curiosity and novel-seeking while those scoring low on this trait tend to prefer adhesion to established patterns. In this regard it is interesting to notice that the impact of Openness to Experience on different online activities may vary over time since the novelty of Internet applications vanishes quickly (Correa, Bachmann, Hinsley, & Gil de Zúñiga, 2013).

On the whole, we expect Openness to Experience to have positive effects on all the modes of online political engagement; we predict that these effects are mainly mediated by interest in politics, political efficacy, and the frequency of Internet use for general, communicational, and informational purposes.

Extraversion

Extraversion entails the adoption of an energetic approach toward the social world and includes traits such as sociability, activity, assertiveness, and positive emotionality (John et al., 2008). It has shown strong and positive effects on political participation, especially on those participatory activities that involve social contacts, such as attending political meetings and volunteering for campaigns (Mondak & Halperin, 2008). Since extraverts are likely to be embedded in large social networks, they have greater opportunities to engage in interpersonal discussion about politics (Gallego & Oberski, 2012; Hibbing et al., 2011). Moreover, extraverts, by virtue of their optimistic and confident nature, typically show higher levels of general personal efficacy: As shown by Vecchione and Caprara (2009), political efficacy acts as a mediator of the relationship between Extraversion and political participation. Extraverts are also politically active online (Quintelier & Theocharis, 2013).

Early studies on the link between personality and Internet revealed that Extraversion was negatively related to Internet usage (Amichai-Hamburger, 2002; Amichai-Hamburger, Wainapel, & Fox, 2002). These scholars hypothesized that the anonymity that characterized social connections in Internet may have attracted people who feel less comfortable in face-to-face social relationships, i.e. introverts. However, also in this case, the rapidly changing Internet applications such as social networking may well explain why more recent studies have found a reversal on the relationship between Extraversion and some specific Internet uses. Indeed, recently it has been shown that Extraverts tend to make great use of social media (e.g., Ryan & Xenos, 2011; Wilson, Fornasier, & White, 2010). This may be explained by the fact that contemporary social networks, such as Facebook, are not characterized by great anonymity and instead are typically used to interact with known people (Lampe, Ellison, & Steinfeld, 2006).

Thus, we expect to find positive effects of Extraversion on all the online engagement modes through the mediation of political efficacy. Moreover, we also expect Extraversion to have a positive indirect effect on online political communication via the mediation of the time spent on Internet for communication activities.

Conscientiousness

Conscientiousness indicates the tendency to be dutiful, organized and reliable.

Conscientious people typically think before acting, delay gratification, follow norms and rules, and plan, organize, and prioritize tasks (John et al., 2008). It might be expected to be positively related to political activities that are regarded as fulfilling civic duties (Gallego & Oberski, 2012).

Moreover, since people scoring high on this trait are highly sensitive to social desirability, they are supposed to avoid forms of participation that contradict social norms, such as protesting. Somewhat surprisingly, however, previous studies have failed to find consistent effects of Conscientiousness on traditional political activities, interpersonal political communication, and political information consumption (e.g., Gallego & Oberski, 2012; Gerber et al., 2011; Hibbing et al., 2011; Mattila et al., 2011; Mondak & Halperin, 2008; Mondak et al., 2010).

In relation to the use of Internet, empirical findings revealed that Conscientiousness is negatively related to Facebook and social networks usage (Ryan & Xenos, 2011; Wilson et al., 2010); similarly Landers and Lounsbury (2006) found that Conscientiousness was negatively related to general indicator of Internet usage. This evidence has been explained considering that people scoring high on this trait tend to be rule-follower, organized, reliable, and structured: This personal characteristic may be in conflict with the unstructured environment of the Internet.

Consequently, we predict that conscientious people would avoid all online participatory modes mainly because they would spend little time on Internet for various activities. We do not have specific expectations related to the links between Conscientiousness and political attitudes.

Agreeableness

Agreeableness represents a prosocial and communal orientation toward others. It indicates the tendency to be kind, considerate, likeable, cooperative and helpful (Graziano & Eisenberg, 1997) and it is the personality factor that is most associated with motives to maintain positive interpersonal relations (Jensen-Campbell et al., 2002). Agreeableness has been related to political participation in two ways. First, since people scoring high on this trait are altruistic and prosocial,

they are likely to be active in political processes and nonpolitical volunteering (Bekkers, 2005; Okun, Pugliese, & Rook, 2007). Second, Agreeableness may be negatively related to political participation because it entails a tendency to avoid conflicting situations. In line with this idea, Ha, Kim and Jo (2013) recently found that Agreeableness was strongly and negatively related to different forms of non-electoral political activities in South Korea, and argued that the relationship may be due to the high degree of conflict that characterizes Korean politics. They also found that agreeable people tend to avoid political discussion groups in Internet.

Agreeableness was found to be negatively related to Internet usage (Landers & Lounsbury, 2006). In this case it has been hypothesized that the negative relationship between Agreeableness and Internet usage may reflect a personal difficulty to get along with others that results in spending more time on the web than in face-to-face interpersonal contacts. However, considering again the idea that social media are today mainly used to interact with known people, we could also expect that highly agreeable individuals would engage more frequently in online communication activities that would allow them to be sociable with others. On the whole, we expect that Agreeableness would have negative effects on online participation and online information seeking through the mediation of low frequency of general and informational Internet use, whereas it would have positive effects on online political communication via the mediation of a high frequency in Internet communication activities.

Neuroticism

Finally, Neuroticism refers to a proneness to negative emotionality, such as feeling anxious, nervous, sad, and tense (John et al., 2008). Individuals who score low in neuroticism are usually more emotionally stable and less reactive to stress. Neuroticism may impact on political participation in two different ways. On the one hand, people low on Neuroticism (emotionally stable) can be expected to be more confident and calm, and thus more prone to participate in the conflictual field of politics; on the other hand, people high on Neuroticism tend to be anxious, and may be disposed to participate because of their worry about political issues. Previous studies

reported both negative and positive relationships between Neuroticism and turnout or donating money to a political candidate (Gerber et al., 2011; Mondak et al., 2010). In relation to political communication, Hibbing and colleagues (2011) showed that neurotic people tend to prefer discussion with likeminded people and avoid conversations with people holding differing viewpoints, but found no relations between Neuroticism and the frequency of political discussion in general. Differently, Mondak and Halperin (2008) reported a positive link between Neuroticism and political discussion. Finally, other studies have found null effects of Neuroticism on a variety of indicators of political participation (Gallego & Oberski, 2012; Mattila et al., 2011; Vecchione & Caprara, 2009).

Results concerning the relationship between Neuroticism and Internet use are also mixed. Some authors found that Neuroticism was negatively related to Web usage (Tuten & Bosnjak, 2001) and less likely to actively participate in online communities activities (Cullen & Morse, 2011), some others found that it was positively related to social media use (Correa et al., 2010) and blogs use (Guadagno et al., 2008), and some others found null effects (Correa et al., 2013; Landers & Lounsbury, 2006). Given that previous findings were mixed in regard to the relationships between Neuroticism and both political attitudes and Internet use we did not have specific expectations regarding this personality trait. Table 1 reports a summary of our expectations about the mediated effects of personality traits on the modes of online political engagement.

[Table 1 about here]

Data and Method

We relied on survey data gained in Sweden on a sample of young adults living in a city of about 130,000 inhabitants, which is similar to the country as a whole with regard to its immigration rate, income level, and unemployment rate. Two age cohorts were included in the present study: 20-year-old and 22-year-old youths. For each age cohort, a target sample of 1000 youths was extracted

from the total population of the corresponding age living in *** in 2010 following a simple random sampling procedure (data were provided by Spar, a Swedish governmental agency handling data from the Swedish Population Register, www.statenspersonadressregister.se/Om-SPAR/In-English.html)². The questionnaire was mailed to the target sample, together with information about the study and a personalized link to the online version of the questionnaire. Participants received a gift card of approximately 28 € for their participation. Non-respondents were sent a reminder card after 7 to 10 days; and, after a further 7 to 10 days, remaining non-respondents were contacted over the phone. The data collection took place between November 2010 and February 2011. In all, 2000 people were contacted, and 1134 completed the questionnaire (response rate of 56.7%). This final sample was composed by 600 20-year-old and 534 22-year-old respondents, 40.39% men, mean age of 20.91.

Measures

Online Political Engagement

Respondents were invited to respond to thirteen items regarding the frequency of their engagement in a variety of online political activities. They were asked to indicate whether, in the two months preceding the survey, they had been engaged in each activity several times (3), occasionally (2), or never (1). Based on Gibson and Cantijoch's (2013) findings about online political engagement dimensions, we checked whether the items tapped three different facets of political engagement on the Internet by comparing a three-dimension factorial solution with a one-dimension solution with all the items loading on one general construct of online political engagement. Items' texts, item-level descriptive statistics, and the corresponding hypothesized latent constructs are reported in the Appendix. Through the mean of CFA (Weighted Least Squares Means and Variance Adjusted, WLSMV, estimator for ordered categorical variables), we compared the models on the basis of their fit indexes (Comparative Fit Index, CFI, Tucker-Lewis Index, TLI, and the Root Mean Square Error of Approximation, RMSEA; cf. Bentler, 1990, and Browne, 1990) and the chi-squared difference test for nested models. The three-dimension model showed good fit

indexes (CFI = 0.980, TLI = 0.975, RMSEA = 0.050, 90% C.I., 0.043-0.057), while the model with one single latent factor did not fit the data as well as the three-dimension model (CFI = 0.938, TLI = 0.925, RMSEA = 0.086, 90% C.I., 0.080-0.096). We compared the models through a chi-squared difference test, since the one-dimension model is a constrained model in which the correlations between the three factors are assumed to be equal to 1, and it is thus nested within the unconstrained model in which the correlations among factors are freed. If constraining free parameters produces a statistically significant increase in the chi-squared of the model fit, then we could assume that the constrained model significantly worsen the model fit. In this case, we obtained a chi-squared difference of 199.826 with 3 degrees of freedom, $p < .001$, and we could conclude that the three-dimension factorial solution fits our data better than the one-dimension solution. Figure 1 reports the results of the three-dimension model and correlations between the latent factors.

[Figure 1 about here]

Personality Traits

The scale is a translation in Swedish of the items in the Big Five Inventory (BFI; John, Donahue, & Kentle, 1991). The BFI consists of 44 items that are distributed along five personality dimensions: Openness to Experience, Conscientiousness, Agreeableness, Extraversion, and Neuroticism. Examples of items are “I consider myself as someone who: is outgoing, sociable (Extraversion), is considerate and kind to almost everyone (Agreeableness), is curious about many different things (Openness to Experience), get nervous easily (Neuroticism), and makes plans and follows through with them (Conscientiousness)”. The response options ranged from 1 ‘Strongly disagree’ to 5 ‘Strongly agree’. The original version of the BFI has shown good reliability, and also both convergent and discriminant validity (Benet-Martinez & John, 1998). In the current study, Cronbach α s ranged from .75 to .85; for each trait we computed a mean index.

Mediating and Control Variables

Political efficacy. Participants were asked to indicate whether, if they really tried, they could manage nine politics-related activities, such as being an active member of a political organization, or being able to convince others to sign petitions about political or social issues (Sohl, 2011). Responses ranged from 1 ‘I definitely couldn’t manage it’ to 4 ‘I definitely could manage it’. A Cronbach’s α of .93 indicated good internal scale consistency. Accordingly, we computed a mean index of political efficacy.

Interest in politics. Interest in politics was assessed through two items: “How interested are you in politics?” and “How interested are you in what is happening in society?” Response ranged from 1 ‘Not at all interested’ to 4 ‘Very interested’. The responses were averaged to provide a single indicator, Spearman $r_s = .60$, $p < .001$.

Internet use. Respondents indicated how much of their free time they spent during a normal day on the Internet, using a scale with the following options: more than 6 hours (6), 3-6 hours (5), 1-3 hours (4), 30 minutes-1 hour (3), up to 30 min (2), no time (1). This variable was used as a general index of Internet use. Moreover, respondents also indicated the extent (responses ranging from 1 ‘Never’ to 5 ‘Daily’) to which they used the Internet to engage in communication-related activities (2 items, Spearman-Brown’s $r_s = .56$, $p < .001$, e.g., “keeping in touch with my friends or updating information through Facebook, or something similar”) and information seeking activities (2 items, Spearman-Brown’s $r_s = .53$, $p < .001$, e.g., “visiting sites to get information about something that interests me”).

Socio-demographic characteristics. In the analyses, we included respondents’ gender (1 = men), age cohort (1 = 22-year-old), and a proxy for subjective perception of socio-economic status (SES), i.e., whether or not respondents had difficulty in managing expenses for food, rent, household bills, etc. (1 = low SES) as control variables.

Political ideology. Given that previous research showed personality factors to be related to political ideology (for instance Openness to Experience is usually higher among liberals than among conservatives), we included in the analyses a proxy of political ideology. We relied on

respondents' preference (expressed on a 5-point scale, ranging from 'strongly dislike' to 'strongly like') for six Swedish political parties. Three of them (Centerpartiet, Moderaterna, and Folkpartiet) are today part of the right-wing Alliansen coalition in power; the other three parties (Vänsterpartiet, Socialdemokraterna, and Miljöpartiet) constituted the left-wing De Rödgröna coalition in the last 2010 general elections. After reverse coding the preference for the left-wing parties, we computed a mean index, Cronbach's $\alpha = .77$. We used this index as a proxy for political ideology, with higher values indicating preference for right-wing parties. Table 2 reports descriptive statistics on independent, mediating, and control variables used in the study.

[Table 2 about here]

Results

We specified a structural equation model (SEM), with latent variables corresponding to each of our three dependent constructs as presented in the measures section above: e-targeted, e-expressive, and e-news. All the other measures were specified as observed variables. Because our hypotheses are mainly tests of mediated effects, we expect that the relationship between personality traits and online forms of political engagement will be mediated by attitudes toward politics (political interest and political efficacy) and by the proneness to use Internet for different purposes (general, communication, and information seeking). As such, we specified that personality traits (as well as socio-demographic variables and political ideology) are exogenous, having a direct effect on all the mediating variables. The latter were specified to influence our dependent variables: While we expected political attitudes to influence all the online engagement forms, we specified that the time spent on Internet in general would influence online political participation, that the time spent on Internet for communication would influence online political communication, and that the time spent on Internet for seeking information would influence the online political information search. In addition, we also estimated the direct effects of all the exogenous variables on the dependent

variables. Given that the latent construct indicators are ordinal variables, the model was estimated using WLSMV in Mplus version 7.1. Estimates for this model are shown in Figure 2; Table 3 reports all the estimates for indirect effects. We excluded from the picture the standard errors, the single items indicators for latent variables, and control variables for the sake of clarity. These estimates can be obtained from the authors upon request. On the whole, the model provided a good fit to the data: CFI = 0.950, TLI = 0.924, RMSEA = .047, 90% C.I., 0.043-0.050.

[Figure 2 and Table 3 about here]

Openness to Experience

As concerns Openness to Experience, we found a set of direct and indirect effects on online political engagement. Openness had direct effects on e-targeted and e-expressive. Moreover, in accordance with our expectations, it also had indirect effects on all modes participation through the mediation of political interest and political efficacy. The same was true for the mediation of the time spent on Internet searching for information, whereas we found a negative link between Openness and the use of Internet for communicative purposes and a null effect on the general index of Internet use. Nonetheless, considering all the mediating variables together, the indirect effects of Openness on online political engagement were all positive and significant.

Extraversion

As expected, Extraversion had positive indirect effects on all online engagement modes through the mediation of political efficacy and a positive indirect effect on e-expressive via the mediation of the time spent on Internet for communication activities. Neither direct effects nor other indirect effects were found for this trait.

Conscientiousness

We expected conscientious people to avoid all online participatory modes mainly because these people tend to spend little time on Internet. The results support this idea by showing that

Conscientiousness has a negative impact on the time spent on Internet, and this leads to a lower chance to be engaged in online political actions. However, this is not true for specific uses of the Internet: Conscientious people do not stay away from Internet when it comes to searching for information or communicate with friends, but – as suggested by the direct and negative effects of Conscientiousness on e-news and e-expressive – they do avoid it when it comes to specific political activities. This is especially interesting when considering that conscientious people also showed to be interested in politics.

Agreeableness

As concerns Agreeableness, results showed that it has a negative impact on the frequency of informational use of the Internet and, consequently, a negative indirect effect on e-news. On the contrary, we did not find any evidence for a negative indirect effect of this personality trait on e-targeted. Moreover, we also found support for the idea that agreeable people tend to spend time on the Internet for communicating with friends which, in turn, leads them to spend time communicating with friends about politics. However, we also found a negative direct effect of Agreeableness on e-expressive. In addition, agreeable people showed low level of political efficacy which results in negative indirect effects on all the engagement forms.

Neuroticism

Finally, we did not have specific expectations regarding Neuroticism. Results showed that this personality trait does not have any direct impact on online modes of engagement. However, we found that neurotic people have low levels of political efficacy and tend to spend time on Internet for communication purposes. These paths resulted in significant negative indirect effects of Neuroticism on all the dependent variables and in a positive indirect effect of Neuroticism on e-expressive. On the whole, the sum of the indirect effects indicates that this personality characteristic does not have impact on online political engagement.

Discussion

The main aim of this study was to investigate the relationships between personality traits and a variety of online political engagements. We argued that in predicting online political engagement we need to consider both the content of the actions, i.e. politics, and the environment in which the actions take place, i.e. Internet. On the one hand, in line with previous results (Quintelier & Theocharis, 2013) we found that some personality characteristics are related to online political engagement in a way that strongly replicates the patterns that have been found for offline engagement. This is the case for Openness to Experience and Extraversion. Indeed, just as it happens in the offline realm, people open to new experience tend to be more engaged in all sorts of online political activities, mainly because they are highly interested in politics and have high levels of political efficacy. Similarly, extroverts tend to engage in online political activities because they show high political efficacy.

On the other hand, we also found that Conscientiousness and Agreeableness have peculiar links with online engagement. First of all, the results showed that conscientious people tend to be less engaged in online political participation because they spend less time on Internet. This is in line with previous studies showing that Conscientiousness is negatively related with Internet use in general (Landers & Lounsbury, 2006) and it supports the idea that the unstructured environment of Internet does not represent a fitting context for conscientious individuals. However, we also showed that conscientious people's online passivity is not totally explained by their avoidance of the Internet. This suggests that conscientious people avoid online participation not only because of the unstructured environment of the Internet, but also because they quite *specifically* avoid political engagement on the Internet, at least as far as information seeking and communication are concerned. This result can be seen in light of the novelty of online modes of political engagement, and nicely fits with contemporary conceptualizations of young people's transitions to new participatory styles. For example, Lance Bennett (2007; 2008) has highlighted two models of citizenship that can be distinguished in the digital age; there are *dutiful citizens*, who prefer participation in conventional political activities and traditional mass media; and there are

actualizing citizens, who favor civic actions that address issues related to the personal values and networks maintained by interactive information technologies. Given that Conscientiousness is measured by “the degree to which a person is willing to comply with conventional rules, norms, and standards” (Costa & McCrae, 1992, p. 9), our findings indicate that – in line with their personality predisposition – conscientious people tend to act more in line with the dutiful-citizenship mode of political engagement.

The results of this study also indicate that agreeable people avoid political discussions on the web, quite independently of the time they spend on online interpersonal communication activities. We argue that this evidence can be explained by considering that agreeable people could be less involved in online discussion mainly due to the high visibility of online acts. Indeed, the Internet environment entails the fast and wide spread of communicative acts. For this reason, discussing politics online today may easily give rise to strong criticism and quickly become the starting point of a dispute. In addition, it is worth noting that online political discussion may be characterized by aggressive or derogatory messaging (Davis, 1999), which agreeable people may dislike due to their propensity to avoid conflicts (e.g., Jensen-Campbell & Graziano, 2001). Indeed, two characteristics of internet-based communication – lack of control and interactive potential – are likely to generate an increase in the number and intensity of conflicts (Albrecht, 2006). Our findings can also be interpreted in light of the fact that people scoring low on Agreeableness tend to be antagonistic, critical and self-centered (Sandy, Bordman, & Deutsch, 2000). In this light, they should not be afraid of public confrontation; in addition, they may find, on the Web, appropriate places where the expressions of their own ideas and beliefs can be put under the spotlight, at least among Internet users. Future studies investigating the specific motivations associated with online political discussion would be helpful in order specifically to test this idea.

This study has some limitations. First, we relied on cross-sectional observations. The debate over the direction of the causal relationships between political attitudes and behaviors is still open. The mainstream approach treats attitudes towards politics as predictors of participation, even

though there are likely reciprocal effects between these variables (Quintelier & Hooghe, 2012).

Unfortunately, we could not test the causal directions of influences between attitudes and behaviors in the current study. Future studies with a longitudinal design should address this issue by testing more formally the role played by political attitudes in mediating the relationship between personality traits and online political engagement. Second, all the measures we used were self-report information. In particular, we relied on self-reported measures of Internet use, which might not reflect actual behavior. Even though this measure has shown to provide accurate estimates (Deane, Podd, & Henderson, 1998), one interesting development of this study would be to track down actual – general and political – online behaviors to analyze online activists' personality profiles.

Despite these limitations, we have provided a set of results that can be regarded as a starting point for developing a more nuanced view of online activists. Indeed, we have extended the ongoing debate over the role of personality in politics to the online domain. Our analyses have revealed that online participatory actions are differentially predicted by individual predispositions. Such differences support what has been labeled as the “independence hypothesis”, i.e. the idea that online engagement diverges from established modes of offline engagement (Gibson & Cantijoch, 2013). As a matter of fact, even if it is true that online political actions are positively related to their offline counterparts, we have shown that – at least as far as personality is concerned as a predictor – their predictions do not fully correspond.

Specific characteristics of the Net – such as horizontal communication and the openings it provides for political communication – have recently been highlighted as qualities that enhance citizens' agency in politics (Dahlgren, 2013), and ultimately the democratic potential of online civic engagement. The emphasis on digital democracy and e-participation led to a debate over whether the ‘digital divide’, i.e. inequality in material and skills access to new technologies (Van Dijk & Hacker, 2003), can affect political engagement (e.g., Sylvester & McGlynn, 2010). However, the extent to which individual predispositions can prevent or enhance citizens' online engagement has

been largely dismissed, and a description of online political activism that lacks nuances still prevails in the literature.

Based on the results of this study, we suggest that a ‘personality divide’ may also affect online political engagement. Indeed, we have shown that agreeable and conscientious people tend to avoid this sphere of engagement, which leaves extra room for people open to new experiences and extraverts. This nuanced profile of online activists informs us about the potential bias of the views expressed in public in deliberations and opinions within the Internet community. To have a more realistic discussion of the Internet’s capabilities to compensate for some of the democratic shortcomings in contemporary offline political discussions and participatory modes, the personality divide needs to be taken into account.

Silvia Russo is a postdoctoral researcher of the Youth & Society at Örebro University, Sweden. Her research interest lies in political behavior, political psychology, and social psychology. More specifically, she focuses on psychosocial predictors of political attitudes and behaviors. She can be reached at silvia.russo@oru.se.

Erik Amnå is Professor in Political Science at Örebro University. He is currently involved in research activities within a longitudinal and inter-disciplinary study on political socialization from adolescence to adulthood and an international study of adolescents' civic skills, attitudes and behaviors. He can be reached at erik.amna@oru.se.

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Endnotes

1. The survey data we used in this study were collected in a non-electoral period. Therefore information about online activities related to electoral campaigns (e-party) was not available.

2. In 2010, 20-year-old youths living in *** municipality were 2221, while 22-year-old youths were 2310.

Appendix

Online political engagement items with descriptive statistics

Stem question: Have you done any of the following in the last two months?	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>
Response options: several times (3), occasionally (2), or never (1)		
E-targeted		
1. Signed an online petition	1.24	.51
2. Taken part in an Internet based protest	1.19	.47
3. Sent an email to a politician	1.04	.22
E-expressive		
4. Linked news to my friends	1.77	.73
5. Discussed societal or political questions with friends on the net	1.45	.66
6. Linked video clips with a political content	1.17	.46
7. Chatted with friends on the Internet about something I've seen on the news	1.85	.72
8. Connected to a group on Facebook (or similar) dealing with societal issues	1.37	.61
9. Sent music to or tipped someone about music that I think has a good political and societal message	1.21	.50
E-news		
10. Visited a political website	1.42	.63
11. Sought information about politics or societal issues on the Internet	1.63	.72
12. Read about politics in a blog	1.42	.63
13. Watched videos or film clips about societal issues or politics	1.49	.62

Figure 1.

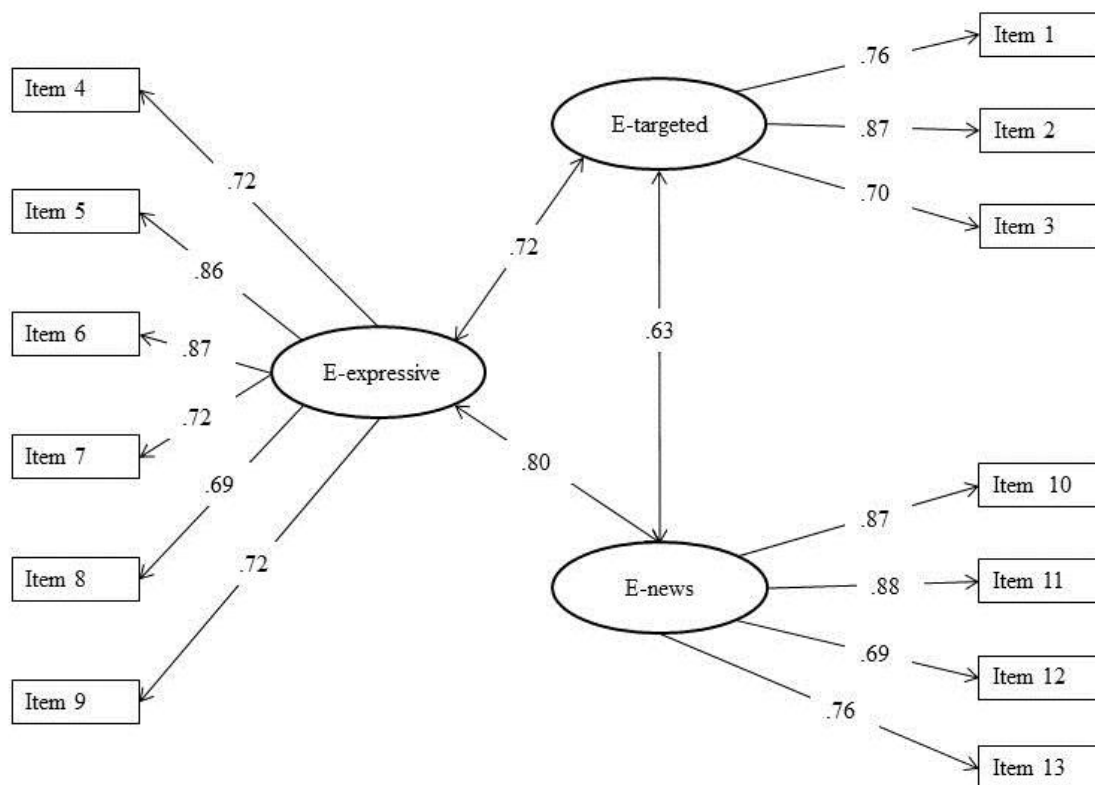


Figure 2.

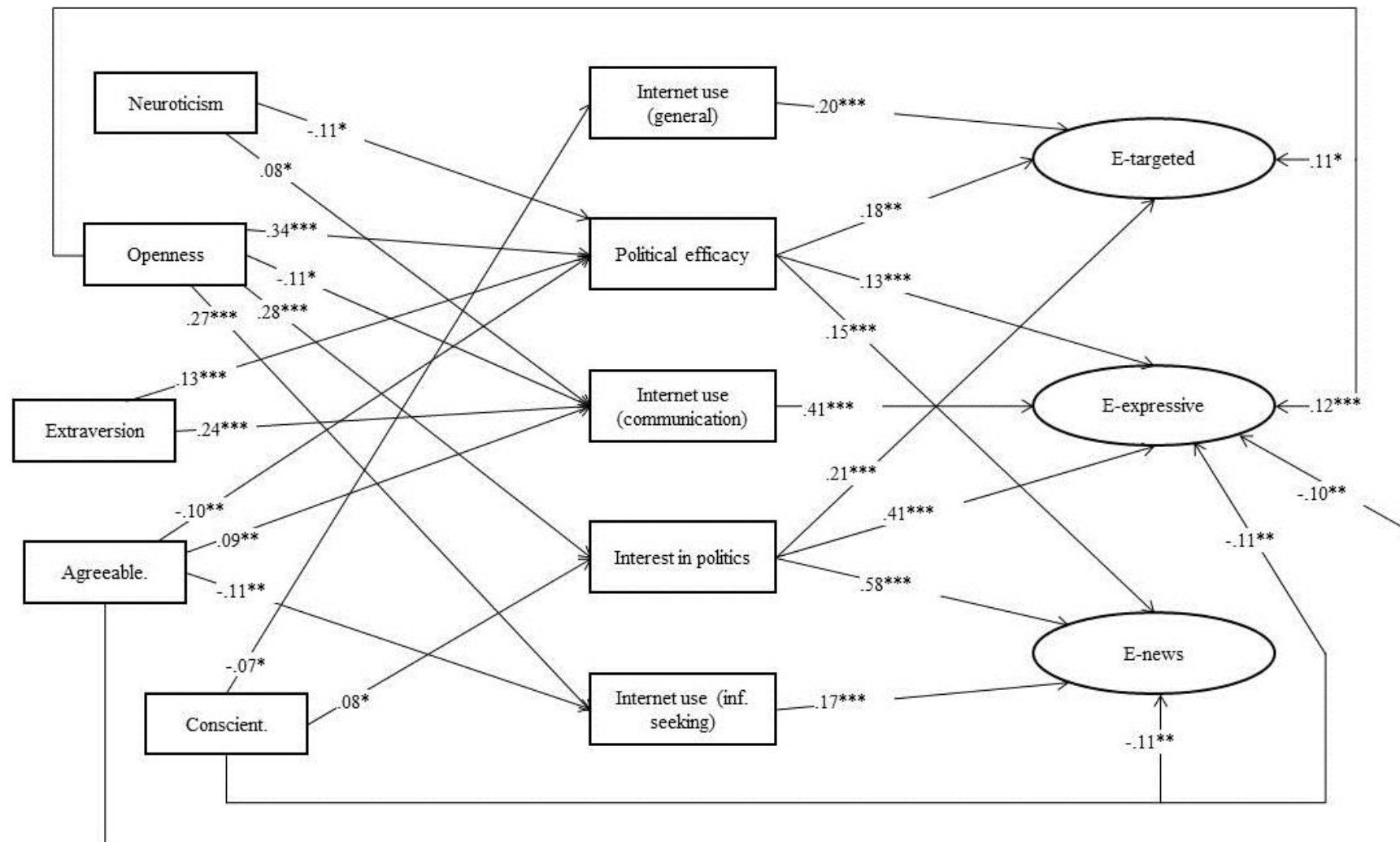


Table 1.

Personality trait	Outcome	Effect	Mediator: Political attitudes	Mediator: Type of Internet use
Openness to Experience	E-targeted	Positive	Interest Efficacy	General
	E-expressive	Positive	Interest Efficacy	Communication
	E-news	Positive	Interest Efficacy	Information seeking
Extraversion	E-targeted	Positive	Efficacy	Communication
	E-expressive	Positive	Efficacy	
	E-news	Positive	Efficacy	
Conscientiousness	E-targeted	Negative		General
	E-expressive	Negative		Communication
	E-news	Negative		Information seeking
Agreeableness	E-targeted	Negative		General
	E-expressive	Positive		Communication
	E-news	Negative		Information seeking

Table 2.

[illegible]

Table 3.

E-targeted				E-expressive				E-news			
From	Via	Est.	<i>p</i> value	From	Via	Est.	<i>p</i> value	From	Via	Est.	<i>p</i> value
Openness	Interest	.060	<.001	Openness	Interest	.116	<.001	Openness	Interest	.165	<.001
Openness	Efficacy	.061	.002	Openness	Efficacy	.045	<.001	Openness	Efficacy	.053	<.001
Openness	Internet use	.008	.250	Openness	Internet use	-.028	.038	Openness	Internet use	.045	<.001
Total		.128	<.001	Total		.133	<.001	Total		.263	<.001
Extraversion	Interest	.010	.175	Extraversion	Interest	.018	.152	Extraversion	Interest	.026	.153
Extraversion	Efficacy	.022	.012	Extraversion	Efficacy	.016	.007	Extraversion	Efficacy	.019	.002
Extraversion	Internet use	-.010	.149	Extraversion	Internet use	.100	<.001	Extraversion	Internet use	.009	.094
Total		.022	.102	Total		.135	<.001	Total		.055	.013
Agreeabl.	Interest	-.005	.385	Agreeabl.	Interest	-.011	.377	Agreeabl.	Interest	-.015	.377
Agreeabl.	Efficacy	-.018	.020	Agreeabl.	Efficacy	-.013	.012	Agreeabl.	Efficacy	-.015	.005
Agreeabl.	Internet use	-.011	.120	Agreeabl.	Internet use	.038	.009	Agreeabl.	Internet use	-.018	.003
Total		-.034	.006	Total		.014	.482	Total		-.048	.021
Conscien.	Interest	.016	.041	Conscien.	Interest	.031	.020	Conscien.	Interest	.043	.019
Conscien.	Efficacy	.007	.271	Conscien.	Efficacy	.005	.263	Conscien.	Efficacy	.006	.254
Conscien.	Internet use	-.015	.035	Conscien.	Internet use	-.012	.401	Conscien.	Internet use	-.006	.276
Total		.007	.566	Total		.023	.271	Total		.043	.053
Neuroticism	Interest	.007	.334	Neuroticism	Interest	.013	.319	Neuroticism	Interest	.019	.320
Neuroticism	Efficacy	-.020	.022	Neuroticism	Efficacy	-.015	.014	Neuroticism	Efficacy	-.017	.006
Neuroticism	Internet use	-.003	.639	Neuroticism	Internet use	.034	.019	Neuroticism	Internet use	-.001	.904

Total	-0.016	.284	Total	.033	.144	Total	.001	.967
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Figures and Tables Captions

Figure 1. Three-factors model for online political engagement. Standardized loadings are displayed; all coefficients are $p < .001$

Figure 2. Structural equation model aimed at predicting different modes of online political engagement. Standardized loadings are displayed; *** $p < .001$, ** $p < .01$, * $p < .05$

Table 1. Summary of expected mediated effects

Table 2. Descriptive statistics and zero-order correlations between independent, mediating, and control variables used in the study; *** $p < .001$, ** $p < .01$, * $p < .05$

Table 3. Indirect effects of personality traits on online political engagement. *Note:* Estimates are standardized coefficients. In predicting e-targeted the mediating variable of Internet use is the general index; in predicting e-expressive the mediating variable is Internet use for communication purposes; predicting e-news, the mediating variable is Internet use for information search.